

**The Ramakrishna Mission  
Institute of Culture Library**

**Presented by**

**Dr. Baridbaran Mukerji**

**RMICL-8**

9

11887





# **DECISION OF CHARACTER**

**[Abridged]**

**BY**

**JOHN FOSTER**

**Introductory Note**

**by**

**JOHN R. MOTT**

**NEW YORK**

**STUDENT VOLUNTEER MOVEMENT**

✓ R.M. 11887	
to 3.	
C	0. 11887
D	11887
L	RS
G	RS

## Introductory Note

While an undergraduate at Cornell University I heard the Honorable Andrew Dickson White give a lecture abounding in wise counsel to new students. Among his many practical suggestions was the advice that all students should read with close attention John Foster on "Decision of Character." Acting on his suggestion I made a careful study of this remarkably helpful essay. Since then I have re-read it many times, and have no hesitation in saying that it has exerted a greater influence on my mental habits than anything else I have ever read or heard. As this paper is being recommended constantly to students, its publication in this convenient form by the Student Volunteer Movement is welcomed most heartily.

I venture to suggest that there is no quality or trait of mind which the young men and young women of our day can cultivate with greater advantage to themselves and to others than that of decision of character. It will do more than any other habit to save time, to conserve nervous energy, and to increase working efficiency. There are few persons who cannot, as a result of disciplining themselves in this respect, increase greatly the output of their lives in definite, practical achievement. Whatever may be the favoring or opposing conditions of one's life; whatever

his problems and perplexities—whether in the realm of conduct or of faith, the details of everyday life or the larger questions of life work, life attitudes, and the religious, political and social relationships of life—the acquiring of the habit of conclusive thinking and of prompt, decisive action will be of inestimable value.

**JOHN R. MOTT.**

## I



WITHOUT that bold quality—decision of character—a human being is indeed a pitiable atom, the sport of divers and casual impulses. It is a poor and disgraceful thing, not to be able to reply, with some degree of certainty, to the simple questions, What will you be? What will you do? A little acquaintance with mankind will supply numberless illustrations of the importance of decision of character. You will often see a person anxiously hesitating a long time between different or opposite determinations, though impatient of the pain of such a state, and ashamed of the debility. A faint impulse of preference alternates toward the one, and toward the other; and the mind, while thus held in a trembling balance, is vexed that it cannot get some new thought, or feeling, or motive; that it has not more sense, more resolution, more of any thing that would save it from envying even the decisive instinct of brutes. It wishes that any circumstance might happen or any person might appear, that could deliver it from the miserable suspense.

In many instances, when a determination is adopted, it is frustrated by this temperament. A man, for example, resolves on a journey to-morrow, which he is not under an absolute necessity to undertake, but the inducements appear, this evening, so strong, that he does not think it pos-



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

sible he can hesitate in the morning. In the morning, however, these inducements have unaccountably lost much of their force. Like the sun that is rising at the same time, they appear dim through a mist; and the sky lowers, or he fancies that it does, and almost wishes to see darker clouds than there actually are; recollections of toils and fatigues ill repaid in past expeditions rise and pass into anticipation; and he lingers, uncertain, till an advanced hour determines the question for him, by the certainty that it is now too late to go.

Perhaps a man has conclusive reasons for wishing to remove to another place of residence. But when he is going to take the first actual step towards executing his purpose, he is met by a new train of ideas, presenting the possible and magnifying the unquestionable, disadvantages and uncertainties of a new situation; awakening the natural reluctance to quit a place to which habit has accommodated his feelings, and which has grown warm to him (if I may so express it) by his having been in it so long; giving a new impulse to his affection for the friends whom he must leave; and so detaining him still lingering, long after his judgment may have dictated to him to be gone.

A man may think of some desirable alteration in his plan of life; perhaps in the arrangements of his family, or in the mode of his intercourse with society,—Would it be a good thing? He thinks it would be a good thing. It certainly would be a very good thing. He wishes it were done. He will attempt it almost immediately. The follow-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

ing day, he doubts whether it would be quite prudent. - Many things are to be considered. May there not be in the change some evil of which he is not aware? Is this a proper time? What will people say?—And thus, though he does not formally renounce his purpose, he shrinks out of it, with an irksome wish that he could be fully satisfied of the propriety of renouncing it. Perhaps he wishes that the thought had never occurred to him, since it has diminished his self-complacency, without promoting his virtue. But next week, his conviction of the wisdom and advantage of such a reform comes again with great force. Then, Is it so practicable as I was at first willing to imagine? Why not? Other men have done much greater things; a resolute mind may brave and accomplish every thing; difficulty is a stimulus and a triumph to a strong spirit; “the joys of conquest are the joys of man.” What need I care for people’s opinion? It shall be done.—He makes the first attempt. But some unexpected obstacle presents itself; he feels the awkwardness of attempting an unaccustomed manner of acting; the questions or the ridicule of his friends disconcert him; his ardor abates and expires. He again begins to question whether it be wise, whether it be necessary, whether it be possible; and at last surrenders his purpose to be perhaps resumed when the same feelings return, and to be in the same manner again relinquished.

While animated by some magnanimous sentiments which he has heard or read, or while musing on some great example, a man may conceive the design, and partly sketch the plan, of a gen-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

erous enterprise; and his imagination revels in the felicity, to others and himself, that would follow from its accomplishment. The splendid representation always centres in himself as the hero who is to realize it.

In a moment of remitted excitement, a faint whisper from within may doubtfully ask, Is this more than a dream; or am I really destined to achieve such an enterprise? Destined!—and why are not this conviction of its excellence, this conscious duty of performing the noblest things that are possible, and this passionate ardor, enough to constitute a destiny?—He feels indignant that there should be a failing part of his nature to defraud the nobler, and cast him below the ideal model and the actual examples which he is admiring; and this feeling assists him to resolve, that he will undertake this enterprise, that he certainly will, though the Alps or the ocean lie between him and the object. [Again, his ardor slackens; distrustful of himself, he wishes to know how the design would appear to other minds; and when he speaks of it to his associates, one of them wonders, another laughs, and another frowns. His pride, while with them, attempts a manful defence; but his resolution gradually crumbles down toward their level; he becomes in a little while ashamed to entertain a visionary project, which therefore, like a rejected friend, desists from intruding on him or following him, except at lingering distance; and he subsides, at last, into what he labors to believe a man too rational for the schemes of ill-calculating enthusiasm.] And it were strange if the effort to make out this favorable estimate of him-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

self did not succeed, while it is so much more pleasant to attribute one's defect of enterprise to wisdom, which on maturer thought disapproves it, than to imbecility, which shrinks from it.

A person of undecisive character wonders how all the embarrassments in the world happened to meet exactly in his way, to place him just in that one situation for which he is peculiarly unadapted, but in which he is also willing to think no other men could have acted with facility or confidence. Incapable of setting up a firm purpose on the basis of things as they are, he is often employed in vain speculations on some different supposable state of things, which would have saved him from all this perplexity and irresolution. He thinks what a determined course he could have pursued, if his talents, his health, his age, had been different; if he had been acquainted with some one person sooner; if his friends were, in this or the other point, different from what they are; or if fortune had showered her favors on him. And he gives himself as much license to complain, as if all these advantages had been among the rights of his nativity, but refused, by a malignant or capricious fate, to his life. Thus he is occupied—instead of marking with a vigilant eye, and seizing with a strong hand, all the possibilities of his actual situation.

A man without decision can never be said to belong to himself; since, if he dared to assert that he did, the puny force of some cause, about as powerful, it may be supposed, as a spider, may make a seizure of the hapless boaster the very next moment and contemptuously exhibit the

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

futility of the determinations by which he was to have proved the independence of his understanding and his will. He belongs to whatever can capture him; and one thing after another vindicates its right to him, by arresting him while he is trying to go on; as twigs and chips, floating near the edge of a river, are intercepted by every weed, and whirled in every little eddy. Having concluded on a design, he may pledge himself to accomplish it—if the hundred diversities of feeling which may come within the week, will let him. His character precluding all foresight of his conduct, he may sit and wonder what form and direction his views and actions are destined to take to-morrow; as a farmer has often to acknowledge that next day's proceedings are at the disposal of its winds and clouds.

This man's notions and determinations always depend very much on other human beings, and what chance for consistency and stability, while the persons with whom he may converse, or transact, are so various? This very evening, he may talk with a man whose sentiments will melt away the present form and outline of his purposes, however firm and defined he may have fancied them to be. A succession of persons whose faculties were stronger than his own, might, in spite of his irresolute reaction, take him and dispose of him as they pleased. Such infirmity of spirit practically confesses him made for subjection, and he passes, like a slave, from owner to owner. Sometimes indeed it happens that a person so constituted falls into the train, and under the permanent ascendancy of some one stronger mind, which thus be-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

comes through life the oracle and guide, and gives the inferior a steady will and plan. This, when the governing spirit is wise and virtuous, is a fortunate relief to the feeling, and an advantage gained to the utility, of the subordinate, and as it were, appended mind.

The regulation of every man's plan must greatly depend on the course of events, which come in an order not to be foreseen or prevented. But in accommodating the plans of conduct to the train of events, the difference between two men may be no less than that, in the one instance, the man is subservient to the events, and in the other, the events are made subservient to the man. Some men seem to have been taken along by a succession of events, and, as it were, handed forward in helpless passiveness from one to another; having no determined principle in their own characters, by which they could constrain those events to serve a design formed (antecedently) to them, or apparently in defiance of them. The events seized them as a neutral material, not they the events. Others, advancing through life with an internal invincible determination, have seemed to make the train of circumstances, whatever they were, conduce as much to their chief design as if they had, by some directing interposition, been brought about on purpose. It is wonderful how even the casualties of life seem to bow to a spirit that will not bow to them, and yield to subserve a design which they may, in their first apparent tendency, threaten to frustrate.

You may have known such examples, though they are comparatively not numerous. You may

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

have seen a man of this vigorous character in a state of indecision concerning some affair in which it was necessary for him to determine, because it was necessary for him to act. But in this case, his manner would assure you that he would not remain long undecided; you would wonder if you found him still balancing and hesitating the next day. If he explained his thoughts, you would perceive that their clear process, evidently at each effort gaining something toward the result, must certainly reach it ere long. The deliberation of such a mind is a very different thing from the fluctuation of one whose second thinking only upsets the first, and whose third confounds both. To know how to obtain a determination, is one of the first requisites and indications of a rationally decisive character.

When the decision was arrived at, and a plan of action approved, you would feel an assurance that something would absolutely be done. It is characteristic of such a mind, to think for effect; and the pleasure of escaping from temporary doubt gives an additional impulse to the force with which it is carried into action. The man will not re-examine his conclusions with endless repetition, and he will not be delayed long by consulting other persons, after he had ceased to consult himself. He cannot bear to sit still among unexecuted decisions and unattempted projects. We wait to hear of his achievements, and are confident we shall not wait long. The possibility or the means may not be obvious to us, but we know that everything will be attempted, and that a spirit of such determined will is like a river,

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

---

which, in whatever manner it is obstructed, will make its way somewhere. It must have cost Caesar many anxious hours of deliberation, before he decided to pass the Rubicon; but it is probable he suffered but few to elapse between the decision and the execution. And any one of his friends who should have been apprised of his determination, and understood his character, would have smiled contemptuously to hear it insinuated that though Caesar had resolved, Caesar would not dare; or that though he might cross the Rubicon, whose opposite bank presented to him no hostile legions, he might come to other rivers, which he would not cross; or that either rivers, or any other obstacle, would deter him from prosecuting his determination from this ominous commencement to its very last consequence.

One signal advantage possessed by a mind of this character is, that its passions are not wasted. The whole measure of passion of which anyone, with important transactions before him, is capable, is not more than enough to supply interest and energy for the required practical exertions; therefore as little as possible of this costly flame should be expended in a way that does not augment the force of action. But nothing can less contribute or be more destructive to vigor of action, than protracted anxious fluctuation, through resolutions adopted, rejected, resumed, suspended; while yet nothing causes a greater expense of feeling. The heart is fretted and exhausted by being subjected to an alternation of contrary excitements, with the ultimate mortifying consciousness of their contributing to no end.



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

The long-wavering deliberation, whether to perform some bold action of difficult virtue, has often cost more to feeling than the action itself, or a series of such actions, would have cost; with the great disadvantage too of not being relieved by any of that invigoration which the man in action finds in the activity itself.

Another advantage of this character, is, that it exempts from a great deal of interference and obstructive annoyance, which an irresolute man may be almost sure to encounter. Weakness, in every form, tempts arrogance; and a man may be allowed to wish for a kind of character with which stupidity and impertinence may not make so free. When a firm decisive spirit is recognized, it is curious to see how the space clears around a man, and leaves him room and freedom. The disposition to interrogate, dictate, or banter, preserves a respectful and politic distance, judging it not unwise to keep the peace with a person of so much energy. A conviction that he understands and that he wills with extraordinary force, silences the conceit that intended to perplex or instruct him, and intimidates the malice that was disposed to attack him. There is a feeling, as in respect to Fate, that the decrees of so inflexible a spirit must be right, or that, at least, they will be accomplished.

But not only will he secure the freedom of acting for himself, he will obtain also by degrees the concurrence of those in whose company he is to transact the business of life. [If the manners of such a man be free from arrogance, and he can qualify his firmness with a moderate degree of in-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

sinuation; and if his measures have partly lost the appearance of being the dictates of his will, under the wider and softer sanction of some experience that they are reasonable; both competition and fear will be laid to sleep, and his will may acquire an unresisted ascendancy over many who will be pleased to fall into the mechanism of a system, which they find makes them more successful and happy than they could have been amidst the anxiety of adjusting plans and expedients of their own, and the consequences of often adjusting them ill. I have known several parents, both fathers and mothers, whose management of their families has answered this description; and has displayed a striking example of the facile complacency with which a number of persons, of different ages and dispositions, will yield to the decisions of a firm mind, acting on an equitable and enlightened system.

The last resource of this character is hard inflexible/pertinacity, on which it may be allowed to rest its strength after finding it can be effectual in none of its milder forms.

## II



**W**HAT are the elements of that mental constitution which is displayed in decision of character? It is beyond all doubt that very much depends on the constitution of the body. It would be for physiologists to explain, if it were explicable, the manner in which corporeal organization affects the mind; I only assume it as a fact, that there is in the material construction of some persons, much more than of others, some quality which augments, if it do not create, both the stability of their resolution, and the energy of their active tendencies. Like the ligatures which one class of the Olympic combatants bound on their hands and wrists, there is something that braces round, if I may so describe it, and compresses the powers of the mind, giving them a steady forcible spring and reaction, which they would presently lose if they could be transferred into a constitution of soft, yielding, treacherous debility. The action of strong character seems to demand something firm in its material basis, as massive engines require, for their weight and for their working, to be fixed on a solid foundation. Accordingly I believe it would be found, that a majority of the persons most remarkable for decisive character, have possessed great constitutional physical firmness. I do not mean an exemption from disease and pain, nor any certain measure of mechanical strength,

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

but a tone of vigor, the opposite to lassitude, and adapted to great exertion and endurance. This is clearly evinced in respect to many of them, by the prodigious labors and deprivations which they have borne in prosecuting their designs. The physical nature has seemed a proud ally of the moral one, and with a hardness that would never shrink, has sustained the energy that could never remit.

If there have been found some resolute spirits powerfully asserting themselves in feeble vehicles, it is so much the better; since this would authorize a hope, that if all the other grand requisites can be combined, they may form a strong character, in spite of an unadapted constitution. And on the other hand, no constitutional hardness will form the true character, without those superior properties; though it may produce that false and contemptible kind of decision which we term obstinacy—a stubbornness of temper, which can assign no reasons but mere will, for a constancy which acts in the nature of dead weight rather than of strength.

The first prominent mental characteristic of the person whom I describe, is a complete confidence in his own judgment. It will perhaps be said, that this is not so uncommon. I, however, think it is uncommon. It is indeed obvious enough, that almost all men have a flattering estimate of their own understanding, and that as long as this understanding has no harder task than to form opinions which are not to be tried in action, they have a most self-complacent assurance of being right. This assurance extends to

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

the judgments which they pass on the proceedings of others. But let them be brought into the necessity of adopting actual measures in an untried situation, where, unassisted by any previous example or practice, they are reduced to depend on the bare resources of judgment alone, and you will see in many cases, this confidence of opinion vanish away. The mind seems all at once placed in a misty vacuity, where it reaches round on all sides, but cannot find nothing to take hold of. Or if not lost in vacuity, it is overwhelmed in confusion; and feels as if its faculties were annihilated in the attempt to think of schemes and calculations among the possibilities, chances, and hazards which overspread a wide untrodden field; and this conscious imbecility becomes severe distress, when it is believed that consequences, of serious or unknown good or evil, are depending on the decisions which are to be formed amidst so much uncertainty. The thought painfully recurs at each step and turn, I may by chance be right, but it is fully as probable I am wrong.

In cases where judgment is not so completely bewildered, you will yet perceive a great practical distrust of it. A man has perhaps advanced a considerable way towards a decision, but then lingers at a small distance from it, till necessity, with a stronger hand than conviction, impels him upon it. He cannot see the whole length of the question, and suspects the part beyond his sight to be the most important, for the most essential point and stress of it may be there. He fears that certain possible consequences, if they should follow, would cause him to reproach himself for his

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

present determination. He wonders how this or the other person would have acted in the same circumstances; eagerly catches at any thing like a respectable precedent; would be perfectly willing to forego the pride of setting an example, for the safety of following one; and looks anxiously round to know what each person may think on the subject; while the various and opposite opinions to which he listens, perhaps only serve to confound his perception of the track of thought by which he had hoped to reach his conclusion. Even when that conclusion is obtained, there are not many minds that might not be brought a few degrees back into dubious hesitation, by a man of respected understanding saying, in a confident tone, "Your plan is injudicious; your selection is unfortunate; the event will disappoint you."

It cannot be supposed that I am maintaining such an absurdity as that a man's complete reliance on his own judgment is a proof of its strength and rectitude. Intense stupidity may be in this point the rival of clear-sighted wisdom. I had once some knowledge of a person whom no mortal could have surpassed, not Cromwell or Strafford, in confidence in his own judgment and consequent inflexibility of conduct; while at the same time his successive schemes were ill-judged to a degree that made his disappointments ridiculous still more than pitiable. He was not an example of simple obstinacy; for he considered his measures, and did not want for reasons which seriously satisfied himself of their being most judicious. This confidence of opinion may be possessed by a person in whom it will be con-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

temptible or mischievous; but its proper place is in a very different character, and without it there can be no dignified actors in human affairs.

If, after it is seen how foolish this confidence appears as a feature in a weak character, it be inquired what, in a rightfully decisive person's manner of thinking, it is that authorizes him in this firm assurance that his view of the concerns before him is comprehensive and accurate; he may, in answer, justify his confidence on such grounds as these; that he is conscious that objects are presented to his mind with an exceedingly distinct and perspicuous aspect, not like the shapes of moonlight, or like Ossian's ghosts, dim forms of uncircumscribed shade; that he sees the different parts of the subject in an arranged order, not in unconnected fragments; that in each deliberation the main object keeps its clear pre-eminence, and he perceives the bearings which the subordinate and conducive ones have on it; that perhaps several trains of thought, drawn from different points, lead him to the same conclusion; and that he finds his judgment does not vary in servility to the moods of his feelings.

It may be presumed that a high degree of this character is not attained without a considerable measure of that kind of certainty, with respect to the relations of things, which can be acquired only from experience and observation. A very protracted course of time, however, may not be indispensable for this discipline. An extreme vigilance in the exercise of observation, and a strong and strongly exerted power of generalizing on experience, may have made a comparative-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

ly short time enough to supply a large share of the wisdom derivable from these sources; so that man may long before he is old be rich in the benefits of experience, and therefore may have all the decision of judgment legitimately founded on that accomplishment. This knowledge from experience he will be able to apply in a direct and immediate manner, and without refining it into general principles, to some situations of affairs, so as to anticipate the consequences of certain actions in those situations by as plain a reason, and as confidently, as the kind of fruit to be produced by a given kind of tree. Thus far the facts of his experience will serve him as precedents; cases of such near resemblance to those in which he is now to act as to afford him a rule by the most immediate inference. At the next step, he will be able to apply this knowledge, now converted into general principles, to a multitude of cases bearing but a partial resemblance to any thing he has actually witnessed. And then, in looking forward to the possible occurrence of altogether new combinations of circumstances, he can trust to the resources which he is persuaded his intellect will open to him, or is humbly confident, if he be a devout man, that the Supreme Intelligence will not suffer to be wanting to him, when the occasion arrives. In proportion as his views include, at all events, more certainties than those of other men, he is with good reason less fearful of contingencies. And if, in the course of executing his design, unexpected disastrous events befall, but which are not owing to anything wrong in the plan and principles of that design, but to foreign

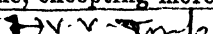


## DECISION OF CHARACTER

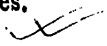
causes; it will be characteristic of a strong mind to attribute these events discriminatively to their own causes and not to the plan, which, therefore, instead of being disliked and relinquished, will be still as much approved as before, and the man will proceed calmly to the sequel of it without any change of arrangement;—unless indeed these sinister events should be of such consequence as to alter the whole state of things to which the plan was correctly adapted, and so create a necessity to form an entirely new one, adapted to that altered condition.

Though he do not absolutely despise the understandings of other men, he will perceive their dimensions as compared with his own, which will preserve its independence through every communication and encounter. It is, however, a part of this very independence, that he will hold himself free to alter his opinion, if the information which may be communicated to him shall bring sufficient reason. And as no one is so sensible of the importance of a complete acquaintance with a subject as the man who is always endeavoring to think conclusively, he will listen with the utmost attention to the information, which may sometimes be received from persons for whose judgment he has no great respect. The information which they may afford him is not at all the less valuable for the circumstance, that his practical inference from it may be quite different from theirs. If they will only give him an accurate account of facts, he does not care how indifferently they may reason on them. Counsel will in general have only so much weight with

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

him as it supplies knowledge which may assist his judgment; he will yield nothing to it implicitly as authority, except when it comes from persons of approved and eminent wisdom; but he may hear it with more candor and good temper, from being conscious of this independence of his judgment, than the man who is afraid lest the first person that begins to persuade him, should baffle his determination. He feels it entirely a work of his own to deliberate and to resolve, amidst all the advice which may be attempting to control him. If, with an assurance of his intellect being of the highest order, he also holds a commanding station, he will feel it gratuitous to consult with any one, excepting merely to receive statements of facts. 

The strongest trial of this determination of judgment is in those cases of urgency where something must immediately be done, and the alternative of right or wrong is of important consequence; as in the duty of a medical man, treating a patient whose situation at once requires a daring practice, and puts it in painful doubt what to dare. A still stronger illustration is the case of a general who is compelled, in the very instant, to make dispositions on which the event of a battle, the lives of thousands of his men, or perhaps almost the fate of a nation, may depend. He may even be placed in a dilemma which appears equally dreadful on both sides.



### III



**HIS** indispensable basis, confidence of opinion, is, however, not enough. For many persons, who have been conscious and proud of a much stronger grasp of thought than ordinary men and have held the most decided opinions on important things to be done, have yet exhibited, in the listlessness or inconstancy of their actions, a contrast and a disgrace to the operations of their understandings. For want of some (cogent) feeling impelling them to carry every internal decision into action they have been still left where they were; and a dignified judgment has been seen in the hapless plight of having no effective forces to execute its decrees.

It is evident then (and this has been partly anticipated), that another essential principle of the character is, a total incapability of surrendering to indifference or delay the serious determinations of the mind. A strenuous will must accompany the conclusions of thought, and constantly incite the utmost efforts to give them a practical result. The intellect must be invested, if I may so describe it, with a glowing atmosphere of passion, under the influence of which, the cold dictates of reason take fire, and spring into active powers.

Persons most remarkably distinguished by this quality, instead of allowing themselves to sit down delighted after the labor of successful

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

thinking, as if they had completed some great thing, regard this labor but as a circumstance of preparation, and the conclusions resulting from it as of no more value (till going into effect), than the entombed lamps of the Rosicrucians. They are not disposed to be content in a region of mere ideas, while they ought to be advancing into the field of corresponding realities; they retire to that region sometimes, as ambitious adventurers anciently went to Delphi, to consult, but not to reside. You will therefore find them almost uniformly in determined pursuit of some object, on which they fix a keen and steady look, never losing sight of it while they follow it through the confused multitude of other things. →

A person actuated by such a spirit, seems by his manner to say: Do you think that I would not disdain to adopt a purpose which I would not devote my utmost force to effect; or that having thus devoted my exertions, I will intermit or withdraw them, through indolence, debility, or caprice; or that I will surrender my object to any interference except the uncontrollable dispensations of Providence? No, I am linked to my determination with iron bands; it clings to me as if a part of my destiny; and if its frustration be, on the contrary, doomed a part of that destiny, it is doomed so only through calamity or death.

This display of systematic energy seems to indicate a constitution of mind in which the passions are commensurate with the intellectual part, and at the same time hold an inseparable correspondence with it. There is such an equality and connection, that subjects of the decisions of judg-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

ments become proportionally and of course the objects of passion. When the judgment decides with a very strong preference, that same strength of preference, actuating also the passions, devotes them with energy to the object, as long as it is thus approved; and this will produce such a conduct as I have described. When therefore a firm, self-confiding, and unaltering judgment fails to make a decisive character, it is evident either that the passions in that mind are too (languid) to be capable of a strong and unremitting excitement, which defect makes an indolent or irresolute man; or that they perversely sometimes coincide with judgment and sometimes clash with it, which makes an inconsistent man. ~~It is~~ ~~the~~ ~~case~~ ~~of~~ ~~an~~ ~~inconsistent~~ ~~man.~~ ←

There is no man so irresolute as not to act with determination in many single cases, where the motive is powerful and simple, and where there is no need of plan and perseverance; but this gives no claim to the term character, which expresses the habitual tenor of a man's active being. The character may be displayed in the successive unconnected undertakings, which are each of limited extent, and end with the attainment of their particular objects. But it is seen in its most commanding aspect in those grand schemes of action, which have no necessary point of conclusion, which continue on through successive years, and extend even to that dark period when the agent himself is withdrawn from human sight.

The effect of what has been called a ruling passion has often been discussed. When its object is noble, and an enlightened understanding regulates its movements, it appears to me a great

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

---

(felicity) but whether its object be noble or not, it infallibly creates, where it exists in great force, that active ardent constancy, which I describe as a capital feature of the decisive character. The subject of such a commanding passion wonders, if indeed he were at leisure to wonder, at the persons who pretend to attach importance to an object which they make none but the most languid efforts to secure. The utmost powers of the man are constrained into the service of the favorite cause by this passion, which sweeps away, as it advances, all the trivial objections and little opposing motives, and seems almost to open a way through impossibilities. This spirit comes on him in the morning as soon as he recovers his consciousness, and commands and impels him through the day, with a power from which he could not emancipate himself if he would. When the force of habit is added, the determination becomes invincible, and seems to assume rank with the great laws of nature, making it nearly as certain that such a man will persist in his course as that in the morning the sun will rise.

A persisting untameable efficacy of soul gives a seductive and pernicious dignity even to a character which every moral principle forbids us to approve. Often in the narrations of history and fiction, an agent of the most dreadful designs compels a sentiment of deep respect for the unconquerable mind displayed in their execution. While we shudder at his activity, we say with regret, mingled with an admiration which borders on partiality: What a noble being this would have been, if goodness had been his destiny! The par-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

tiality is evinced in the very selection of terms, by which we show that we are tempted to refer his atrocity rather to his destiny than to his choice. I wonder whether an emotion like this, have not been experienced by each reader of *Paradise Lost*, relative to the leader of the infernal spirits; a proof, if such were the fact, of some insinuation of evil into the magnificent creation of the poet. In some of the high examples of ambition (the ambition which is a vice), we almost revere the force of mind which impelled them forward through the longest series of action, superior to doubt and fluctuation, and disdainful of ease, of pleasure, of opposition, and of danger. We bend in homage before the ambitious spirit which reached the true sublime in the reply of Pompey to his friends, who dissuaded him from hazarding his life on a tempestuous sea in order to be at Rome on an important occasion: "It is necessary for me to go, it is not necessary for me to live."

Revenge has produced wonderful examples of this unremitting constancy to a purpose.

I have known of a young man who wasted in two or three years a large patrimony, in profligate revels with a number of worthless associates calling themselves his friends, till his last means were exhausted, when they of course treated him with neglect or contempt. Reduced to absolute want, he one day went out of the house with an intention to put an end to his life; but wandering awhile almost unconsciously, he came to the brow of an eminence which overlooked what were lately his estates. Here he sat down, and remained

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

fixed in thought a number of hours, at the end of which he sprang from the ground with a vehement exulting emotion. He had formed his resolution, which was that all these estates should be his again; he had formed his plan too, which he instantly began to execute. He was determined to seize the very first opportunity, of however humble a kind, to gain any money, though it were ever so despicable a trifle, and resolved absolutely not to spend, if he could help it, a farthing of whatever he might obtain. The first thing that drew his attention was a load of coal on the pavement before a house. He offered himself to shovel or wheel it into the place where it was to be laid, and was employed. He received a few pence for the labor; and then, in pursuance of the saving part of his plan, requested some small gratuity of meat and drink, which was given him. He promptly seized every opportunity which could advance his design, without regarding the meanness of occupation or appearance. The final result was, that he more than recovered his lost possessions, and died an inveterate miser.

But not less decision has been displayed by men of virtue. In this distinction no man ever exceeded the illustrious Howard.

The energy of his determination was so great, that if, instead of being habitual, it had been shown only for a short time on particular occasions, it would have appeared a vehement (impetuosity;) but by being (unintermitted,) it had an equability of manner which scarcely appeared to exceed the tone of a calm constancy, it was so totally the reverse of any thing like turbulence



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

or agitation. It was the calmness of an intensity kept uniform by the nature of the human mind forbidding it to be more, and by the character of the individual forbidding it to be less. The habitual passion of his mind was a pitch of excitement and impulsion almost equal to the temporary extremes and paroxysms of common minds; as a great river, in its customary state, is equal to a small or moderate one when swollen to a torrent.

The moment of finishing his plans in deliberation, and commencing them in action, was the same. I wonder what must have been the amount of that bribe, in emolument or pleasure, that would have detained him a week inactive after their final adjustment. The law which carries water down a declivity was not more unconquerable and invariable than the determination of his feelings toward the main object. The importance of this object held his faculties in a state of determination which was too rigid to be affected by lighter interests, and on which therefore the beauties of nature and of art had no power. He had no leisure feeling which he could spare to be diverted among the innumerable varieties of the extensive scene which he traversed; his subordinate feelings nearly lost their separate existence and operation, by falling into the grand one. There have not been wanting trivial minds, to mark this as a fault in his character. But the mere men of taste ought to be silent respecting such a man as Howard; he is above their sphere of judgment. The invisible spirits, who fulfil their commission of philanthropy among mortals, do not care about pictures, statues, and sumptu-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

ous buildings; and no more did he, when the time in which he must have inspected and admired them, would have been taken from the work to which he had consecrated his life. The curiosity which he might feel, was reduced to wait till the hour should arrive, when its gratification should be presented by conscience, (which kept a scrupulous charge of all his time,) as the duty of that hour. If he was still at every hour, when it came, fated to feel the attractions of the fine arts but the second claim, they might be sure of their revenge; for no other man will ever visit Rome under such a despotic acknowledged rule of duty. as to refuse himself time for surveying the magnificence of its ruins. Such a sin against taste is very far beyond the reach of common saintship to commit. It implied an inconceivable severity of conviction, that he had one thing to do, and that he who would do some great thing in this short life, must apply himself to the work with such a concentration of his forces, which, to idle spectators, who live only to amuse themselves, looks like insanity. *Handwritten flourish*

His attention was so strongly and tenaciously fixed on his object, that even at the greatest distance, as the Egyptian pyramids to travellers, it appeared to him with a luminous distinctness as if it had been nigh, and beguiled the toilsome length of labor and enterprise by which he was to reach it. So conspicuous was it before him, that not a step deviated from the direction, and every movement and every day was an approximation. As his method referred everything he did and thought to the end, and as his exertion

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

did not relax for a moment, he made the trial, so seldom made, what is the utmost effect which may be granted to the last possible efforts of a human agent: and therefore what he did not accomplish, he might conclude to be placed beyond the sphere of mortal activity, and calmly leave to the immediate disposal of Providence.

Unless the eternal happiness of mankind be an insignificant concern, and the passion to promote it an inglorious distinction, I may cite George Whitefield as a noble instance of this attribute of the decisive character, this intense necessity of action. The great cause which was so languid a thing in the hands of many of its advocates, assumed in his administrations an unmitigable urgency.

Many of the Christian missionaries among the heathen, such as Brainerd, Elliot, and Schwartz, have displayed memorable examples of this dedication of their whole being to their office, this abjuration of all the quiescent feelings.

This would be the proper place for introducing (if I did not hesitate to introduce in any connection with merely human instances) the example of him who said: "I must be about my Father's business. My meat and drink is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how am I straitened till it be accomplished!"

#### IV.



**A****FTER** the illustrations used it will seem but a very slight transition when I specify courage, as an essential part of the decisive character. An intelligent man adventurous only in thought, may sketch the most excellent scheme, and after duly admiring it, and himself as its author, may be reduced to say: What a noble spirit that would be which should dare to realize this! A noble spirit! is it I? And his heart may answer in the negative, while he glances a mortified thought of inquiry round to recollect persons who would venture what he dares not, and almost hopes not to find them. Or if by extreme effort he has brought himself to a resolution of braving the difficulty, he is compelled to execrate the timid lingerings that still keep him back from the trial. A man endowed with the complete character, might say, with a sober consciousness as remote from the spirit of bravado as it is from timidity, Thus and thus, is my conviction and my determination; now for the phantoms of fear; let me look them in the face; their menacing glare and ominous tones will be lost on me; I dare do all that may become a man. I trust I shall firmly confront everything that threatens me while prosecuting my purpose, and I am prepared to meet the consequences of it when it is accomplished. I should despise a being, though it were

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

myself, whose agency could be held enslaved by the gloomy shapes of imagination, by the haunting recollections of a dream, by the whistling or the howling of winds, by the shriek of owls, by the shades of midnight, or by the threats or frowns of man. I should be indignant to feel that in the commencement of an adventure, I could think of nothing but the deep pit by the side of the way where I must walk, into which I may slide, the mad animal which it is not impossible that I may meet, or the assassin who may lurk in a thicket of yonder wood. And I disdain to compromise the interests that rouse me to action, for the privilege of an ignoble security.

As the conduct of a man of decision is always individual, and often singular, he may expect some serious trials of courage. For one thing, he may be encountered by the strongest disapprobation of many of his connections, and the censure of the greater part of the society where he is known. In this case, it is not a man of common spirit that can show himself just as at other times, and meet their anger in the same undisturbed manner as he would meet some ordinary inclemency of the weather; that can, without harshness or violence, continue to effect every moment some part of his design, coolly replying to each ungracious look and indignant voice: I am sorry to oppose you; I am not unfriendly to you, while thus persisting in what excites your displeasure; it would please me to have your approbation and concurrence, and I think I should have them if you would seriously consider my reasons; but meanwhile, I am superior to opinion, I am not to

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

be intimidated by reproaches, nor would your favor and applause be any reward for the sacrifice of my object. As you can do without my approbation, I can certainly do without yours; it is enough that I can approve myself, it is enough that I appeal to the last authority in the creation.

Amuse yourselves as you may, by continuing to censure or to rail; I must continue to act. 11 887

The attack of contempt and ridicule is perhaps a still greater trial of courage. It is felt by all to be an admirable thing, when it can in no degree be ascribed to the hardness of either stupidity or confirmed depravity, to sustain for a considerable time, or in numerous instances, the looks of scorn, or an unrestrained shower of taunts and jeers, with perfect composure, and proceed immediately after, or at the time, on the business that provokes all this ridicule. This invincibility of temper will often make even the scoffers themselves tired of the sport: they begin to feel that against such a man it is a poor sort of hostility to joke and sneer; and there is nothing that people are more mortified to spend in vain than their scorn. Till, however, a man shall become a veteran, he must reckon on sometimes meeting this trial in the course of virtuous enterprise. And if, at the suggestion of some meritorious but unprecedented proceeding, I hear him ask, with a look and tone of shrinking alarm: But will they not laugh at me?—I know that he is not the person whom this essay attempts to describe. A man of the right kind would say: They will smile, they will laugh, will they? Much good may it do them. I have something

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

else to do than to trouble myself about their mirth. I do not care if the whole neighborhood were to laugh in a chorus. I should indeed be sorry to see or hear such a number of fools, but pleased enough to find that they considered me as an outlaw to their tribe. The good to result from my project will not be less, because vain and shallow minds that cannot understand it, are diverted at it and at me. What should I think of my pursuits, if every thoughtless being could comprehend or would applaud them; and of myself, if my courage needed levity and ignorance for their allies; or could be abashed at their sneers?

I remember, that on reading the account of the project for conquering Peru, formed by Almagro, Pizarro, and De Luques, while abhorring the actuating principle of the men, I could not help admiring the hardihood of mind which made them regardless of scorn. These three individuals, before they had obtained any associates, or arms, or soldiers, or more than a very imperfect knowledge of the power of the kingdom they were to conquer, celebrated a solemn mass in one of the great churches, as a pledge and a commencement of the enterprise, amidst the astonishment and contempt expressed by a multitude of people for what was deemed a monstrous project. They, however, proceeded through the service, and afterwards to their respective departments of preparation, with an apparently entire insensibility to all this triumphant contempt; and thus gave the first proof of possessing that invincible firmness with which they afterwards prosecuted

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

their design, till they attained a success, the destructive process and many of the results of which humanity has ever deplored.

Milton's Abdiel is a noble illustration of the courage that rises invincible above the derision not only of the multitude, but of the proud and elevated.

But there may be situations where decision of character will be brought to trial against evils of a darker aspect than disapprobation or contempt. There may be the threatening of serious sufferings; and very often, to dare as far as conscience or a great cause required, has been to dare to die. In almost all plans of great enterprise, a man must systematically dismiss, at the entrance, every wish to stipulate with his destiny for safety. He voluntarily treads within the precincts of danger; and though it be possible he may escape, he ought to be prepared with the fortitude of a self-devoted victim. This is the inevitable condition on which heroes, travellers, or missionaries among savage nations, and reformers on a grand scale, must commence their career. Either they must allay their fire of enterprise, or abide the liability to be exploded by it from the world.

The last decisive energy of a rational courage, which confides in the Supreme Power, is very sublime. It makes a man who intrepidly dares every thing that can oppose or attack him within the whole sphere of mortality; who will still press toward his object while death is impending over him; who would retain his purpose unshaken amidst the ruins of the world.



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

It was in the true elevation of this character that Luther, when cited to appear at the Diet of Worms, under a very questionable assurance of safety from high authority, said to his friends, who conjured him not to go, and warned him by the example of John Huss, whom, in a similar situation, the same pledge of protection had not saved from the fire, "I am called in the name of God to go, and I would go, though I were certain to meet as many devils in Worms as there are tiles on the houses."

A reader of the Bible will not forget Daniel, braving in calm devotion the decree which virtually consigned him to the den of lions: or Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego, saying to the tryant, "We are not careful to answer thee in this matter," when the fiery furnace was in sight.

The combination of these several essential principles constitutes that state of mind which is a grand requisite to decision of character, and perhaps its most striking distinction—the full agreement of the mind with itself, the consenting co-operation of all its powers and all its dispositions.

What an unfortunate task it would be for a charioteer, who had harnessed a set of horses, however strong, if he could not make them draw together; if while one of them would go forward, another was restive, another struggled backward, another started aside. If even one of the four were unmanageably perverse, while the three were tractable, an aged beggar with his crutch might leave Phaeton behind. So in a human being, unless the chief forces act consentaneously, there can be no inflexible vigor, either of will or

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

execution. One dissentient principle in the mind not only deducts so much from the strength and mass of its agency, but counteracts and embarrasses all the rest. If the judgment holds in low estimation that which yet the passions incline to pursue, the pursuit will be irregular and inconstant, though it may have occasional fits of animation, when those passions happen to be highly stimulated. If there is an opposition between judgment and habit, though the man will probably continue to act mainly under the sway of habit in spite of his opinions, yet sometimes the intrusion of those opinions will have for the moment an effect like that of Prospero's wand on the limbs of Ferdinand; and to be alternately impelled by habit, and checked by opinion, will be a state of vexatious debility. If two principal passions are opposed to each other, they will utterly distract any mind, whatever might be the force of its faculties if acting without embarrassment. The one passion may be somewhat stronger than the other, and therefore just prevail barely enough to give a feeble impulse to the conduct of the man; a feebleness which will continue till there be a greater disparity between these rivals, in consequence of a reinforcement to the slightly ascendent one, by new impressions, or the gradual strengthening of habit forming in its favor. The disparity must be no less than an absolute predominance of the one and subjection of the other, before the prevailing passion will have at liberty from the intestine conflict any large measure of its force to throw activity into the system of conduct. If, for instance, a man feels at once

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

the love of fame which is to be gained only by arduous exertions, and an equal degree of the love of ease or pleasure which precludes those exertions; if he is eager to show off in splendor, and yet anxious to save money; if he has the curiosity of adventure, and yet that solicitude for safety, which forbids him to climb a precipice, descend into a cavern, or explore a dangerous wild; if he has the stern will of a tyrant, and yet the relentings of a man; if he has the ambition to domineer over his fellow-mortals, counteracted by a reluctance to inflict so much mischief as it might cost to subdue them; we may anticipate the irresolute contradictory tenor of his actions. Especially if conscience, that great troubler of the human breast, loudly declares against a man's wishes or projects, it will be a fatal enemy to decision, till it either reclaim the delinquent passions, or be debauched or laid dead by them.

Lady Macbeth may be cited as a harmonious character, though the epithet seem strangely applied. She had capacity, ambition, and courage; and she willed the death of the king. Macbeth had still more capacity, ambition, and courage; and he also willed the murder of the king. But he had, besides, humanity, generosity, conscience, and some measure of what forms the power of conscience, the fear of a Superior Being. Consequently, when the dreadful moment approached, he felt an insupportable conflict between these opposite principles, and when it was arrived his utmost courage began to fail. The worst part of his nature fell prostrate under the power of the better; the angel of goodness arrested the demon

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

that grasped the dagger; and would have taken that dagger away, if the pure demonic firmness of his wife, who had none of these counteracting principles, had not shamed and hardened him to the deed.

The poet's delineation of Richard III. offers a dreadful specimen of this indivisibility of mental impulse. After his determination was fixed, the whole mind with the compactest fidelity supported him in prosecuting it. Securely privileged from all interference of doubt that could linger, or humanity that could soften, or timidity that could shrink, he advanced with a concentrated constancy through scene after scene of atrocity, still fulfilling his vow to "cut his way through with a bloody axe." He did not waver while he pursued his object, nor relent when he seized it.

Cromwell (whom I mention as a parallel, of course not to Richard's wickedness, but to his inflexible vigor), lost his mental consistency in the latter end of a career which had displayed a superlative example of decision. It appears that the wish to be a king, at last arose in a mind which had condemned royalty, and battled it from the land. As far as he really had any republican principles and partialities, this new desire must have been a very untoward associate for them, and must have produced a schism in the breast where all the strong forces of thought and passion had acted till then in concord. The new form of ambition became just predominant enough to carry him, by slow degrees, through the embarrassment and the shame of this incongruity, into an irresolute determination to assume the crown;

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

so irresolute, that he was reduced again to a mortifying indecision by the remonstrances of some of his friends, which he could have slighted, and by an apprehension of the public disapprobation, which he could have braved, if some of the principles of his own mind had not shrunk or revolted from the design. When at last the motives for relinquishing this design prevailed, it was by so small a degree of preponderance, that his reluctant refusal of the offered crown was the voice of only half his soul.

Not only two distinct counteracting passions, but one passion interested for two objects, both equally desirable, but of which the one must be sacrificed, may annihilate in that instance the possibility of a resolute promptitude of conduct. The following story from some historian is applicable to this remark. A father went to the agents of a tyrant, to endeavor to redeem his two sons, military men, who, with some other captives of war, were condemned to die. He offered, as a ransom, a sum of money, and to surrender his own life. The tyrant's agents who had them in charge, informed him that this equivalent would be accepted for one of his sons, and for one only, because they should be accountable for the execution of two persons; he might therefore choose which he would redeem. Anxious to save even one of them thus at the expense of his own life, he yet was unable to decide which should die, by choosing the other to live, and remained in the agony of this dilemma so long that they were both irreversibly ordered for execution.

## V



**I**t were absurd to suppose that any human being can attain a state of mind capable of acting in all instances invariably with the full power of determination; but it is obvious that many have possessed a habitual and very commanding measure of it; and I think the preceding remarks have taken account of its chief characteristics and constituent principles.

The slightest view of human affairs shows what fatal and wide-spread mischief may be caused by men of this character, when misled or wicked. You have but to recollect the conquerors, despots, bigots, unjust conspirators, and signal villains of every class, who have blasted society by the relentless vigor which could act consistently and heroically wrong. Till therefore the virtue of mankind be greater, there is reason to be pleased that so few of them are endowed with extraordinary decision.

Even when dignified by wisdom and principle, this quality requires great care in the possessors of it to prevent its becoming unamiable. As it involves much practical assertion of superiority over other human beings, it should be as temperate and conciliating as possible in manner; else pride will feel provoked, affection hurt, and weakness oppressed. But this is not the manner which will be most natural to such a man; rather

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

it will be high-toned, laconic, and careless of pleasing. He will have the appearance of keeping himself always at a distance from social equality; and his friends will feel as if their friendship were continually sliding into subserviency; while his intimate connections will think he does not attach the due importance either to their opinions or to their regard. His manner, when they differ from him, or complain, will be too much like the expression of slight estimation, and sometimes of disdain.

When he can accomplish a design by his own personal means alone, he may be disposed to separate himself to the work with the cold-self-enclosed individuality on which no one has any hold, which seems to recognize no kindred being in the world, which takes little account of good wishes and kind concern, any more than it cares for opposition; which seeks neither aid nor sympathy, and seems to say, I do not want any of you, and I am glad that I do not; leave me alone to succeed or die. This has a very repellent effect on the friends who wished to feel themselves of some importance, in some way or other, to a person whom they are constrained to respect. When assistance is indispensable to his undertakings, his mode of signifying it will seem to command, rather than invite, the co-operation.

In consultation, his manner will indicate that when he is equally with the rest in possession of the circumstances of the case, he does not at all expect to hear any opinions that shall correct his own; but is satisfied that either his present conception of the subject is the just one, or that his

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

own mind must originate that which shall be so. This difference will be apparent between him and his associates, that their manner of receiving his opinions is that of agreement or dissent; his manner of receiving theirs is judicial—that of sanction or rejection. He has the tone of authoritatively deciding on what they say, but never of submitting to decision what himself says. Their coincidence with his views does not give him a firmer assurance of his being right, nor their dissent any other impression than that of their incapacity to judge. If his feeling took the distinct form of a reflection, it would be: Mine is the business of comprehending and devising, and I am here to rule this company, and not to consult them; I want their docility, and not their arguments; I am come, not to seek their assistance in thinking, but to determine their concurrence in executing what is already thought for them. Of course, many suggestions and reasons which appear important to those they come from will be disposed of by him with a transient attention, or a light facility, that will seem very disrespectful to persons who possibly hesitate to admit that he is a demi-god, and that they are but idiots.

Even the assenting convictions, and practical compliances, yielded by degrees to this decisive man, may be somewhat undervalued; as they will appear to him no more than simply coming, and that very slowly, to a right apprehension; whereas he understood and decided justly from the first, and has been right all this while.

He will be in danger of rejecting the just claims of charity for a little tolerance to the



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

prejudices, hesitation, and timidity, of those with whom he has to act. He will say to himself, I wish there were anything like manhood among the beings called men; and that they could have the sense and spirit not to let themselves be hampered by so many silly notions and childish fears! Why cannot they either determine with some promptitude, or let me do it for them? Am I to wait till debility become strong, and folly wise?—If full scope be allowed to these tendencies, they may give too much of the character of a tyrant to even a man of elevated virtue, since, in the consciousness of the right intention, and the assurance of the wise contrivance, of his designs, he will hold himself justified in being regardless of every thing but the accomplishment of them. He will forget all respect for the feelings and liberties of beings who are accounted but a subordinate machinery, to be actuated, or to be thrown aside when not actuated by the spring of his commanding spirit.

I have before asserted that this strong character may be exhibited with a mildness, or at least temperance, of manner; and that, generally, it will thus best secure its efficacy. But this mildness must often be at the cost of great effort; and how much considerate policy or benevolent forbearance it will require, for a man to exert his utmost vigor in the very task, as it will appear to him at the time, of cramping that vigor!—Lycurgus appears to have been a high example of conciliating patience in the resolute prosecution of designs to be effected among a perverse multitude.

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

It is probable that the men most distinguished for decision have not in general possessed a large share of tenderness; and it is easy to imagine that the laws of our nature will, with great difficulty, allow the combination of the refined sensibilities with a hard, never-shrinking, never-yielding firmness. Is it not almost of the essence of this temperament to be free from even the perception of such impressions as cause a mind, weak through susceptibility, to relax or waver; just as the skin of the elephant, or the armor of the rhinoceros, would be but indistinctly sensible to the application of a force by which a small animal, with a skin of thin and delicate texture, would be pierced or lacerated to death? No doubt, this firmness consists partly in a commanding and repressive power over feelings, but it may consist fully as much in not having them. To be exquisitely alive to gentle impressions, and yet to be able to preserve, when the prosecution of a design requires it, an immovable heart amidst the most imperious causes of subduing emotion, is perhaps not an impossible constitution of mind, but it must be the rarest endowment of humanity.

If you take a view of the first rank of decisive men, you will observe that their faculties have been too much bent to arduous effort, their souls have been kept in too military an attitude, they have been begirt with too much iron for the melting movements of the heart. Their whole being appears too much arrogated and occupied by the spirit of severe design, urging them toward some defined end, to be sufficiently at ease for the indolent complacency, the soft lassitude

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

of gentle affections, which love to surrender themselves to the present felicities, forgetful of all "enterprises of great pith and moment." The man seems rigorously intent still on his own affairs, as he walks, or regales, or mingles with domestic society; and appears to despise all the feelings that will not take rank with the grave labors and decisions of intellect, or coalesce with the unremitting passion which is his spring of action; he values not feelings which he cannot employ either as weapons or as engines. He loves to be actuated by a passion so strong as to compel into exercise the utmost force of his being, and fix him in a tone, compared with which, the gentle affections, if he had felt them, would be accounted tameness, and their exciting causes insipidity.

Yet we cannot willingly admit that those gentle affections are totally incompatible with the most impregnable resolution and vigor; nor can we help believing that such men as Timoleon, Alfred, and Gustavus Adolphus, must have been very fascinating associates in private and domestic life, whenever the urgency of their affairs would allow them to withdraw from the interests of statesmen and warriors, to indulge the affections of men: most fascinating, for, with relations or friends who had any right perceptions, an effect of the strong character would be recognized in a peculiar charm imparted by it to the gentle moods and seasons. The firmness and energy of the man whom nothing could subdue, would exalt the quality of the tenderness which softened him to recline.

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

But it were much easier to enumerate a long train of ancient and modern examples of the vigor unmitigated by the sensibility. Perhaps indeed these indomitable spirits have yielded sometimes to some species of love, as a mode of amusing their passions for an interval, till greater engagements have summoned them into their proper element; when they have shown how little the sentiment was an element of the heart, by the ease with which they could relinquish the temporary favorite. In other cases, where there have not been the selfish inducements, which this passion supplies, to the exhibition of something like softness, and where they have been left to the trial of what they might feel of the sympathies of humanity in their simplicity, no rock on earth could be harder.

## VI



**V**ARIOUS circumstances might be specified as adapted to confirm such a character as I have attempted to describe. I shall notice two or three.

And first, opposition. The passions which inspire men to resistance, and sustain them in it, such as anger, indignation, and resentment, are evidently far stronger than those which have reference to friendly objects; and if any of these strong passions are frequently excited by opposition, they infuse a certain quality into the general temperament of the mind, which remains after the immediate excitement is past. They continually strengthen the principle of re-action; they put the mind in the habitual array of defence and self-assertion, and often give it the aspect and the posture of a gladiator, when there appears no confronting combatant. When these passions are provoked in such a person as I describe, it is probable that each excitement is followed by a greater increase of this principle of re-action than in other men because this result is so congenial with his naturally resolute disposition. Let him be opposed then, throughout the prosecution of one of his designs, or in the general tenor of his actions, and this constant opposition would render him the service of an ally, by augmenting the resisting and defying

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

power of his mind. An irresolute spirit indeed might be quelled and subjugated by a formidable and persisting opposition; but the strong wind which blows out a taper, exasperates a powerful fire (if there be fuel enough) to an indefinite intensity. It would be found, in fact, on a recollection of instances, that many of the persons most conspicuous for decision, have been exercised and forced to this high tone of spirit in having to make their way through opposition and contest; a discipline under which they were wrought to both a prompt acuteness of faculty, and an inflexibility of temper, hardly attainable even by minds of great natural strength, if brought forward into the affairs of life under indulgent auspices, and in habits of easy and friendly coincidence with those around them. Often, however, it is granted, the firmness matured by such discipline is, in a man of virtue, accompanied with a Catonic severity, and in a mere man of the world is an unhumanized repulsive hardness.

Desertion may be another cause conducive to the consolidation of this character. A kind mutually reclining dependence is certainly for the happiness of human beings; but this necessarily prevents the development of some great individual powers which would be forced into action by a state of abandonment. I lately happened to notice, with some surprise, an ivy, which, finding nothing to cling to beyond a certain point, had shot off into a bold elastic stem, with an air of as much independence as any branch of oak in the vicinity. So a human being thrown, whether by cruelty, justice, or accident, from all social

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

support and kindness, if he have any vigor of spirit, and be not in the bodily debility of either childhood or age, will begin to act for himself with a resolution which will appear like a new faculty. And the most absolute inflexibility is likely to characterize the resolution of an individual who is obliged to deliberate without consultation, and execute without assistance. He will disdain to yield to beings who have rejected him, or to forego a particle of his designs or advantages in concession to the opinions or the will of all the world. Himself, his pursuits, and his interests, are emphatically his own. "The world is not his friend, nor the world's law;" and therefore he becomes regardless of everything but its power, of which his policy carefully takes the measure, in order to ascertain his own means of action and impunity, as set against the world's means of annoyance, prevention, and retaliation.

If this person have but little humanity or principle, he will become a misanthrope, or perhaps a villain, who will resemble a solitary wild beast of the night, which makes prey of everything it can overpower, and cares for nothing but fire. If he be capable of grand conception and enterprise, he may, like Spartacus, make a daring attempt against the whole social order of the state where he has been oppressed. If he be of great humanity and principle, he may become one of the noblest of mankind, and display a generous virtue to which society had no claim, and which it is not worthy to reward, if it should at last become inclined. No, he will say, give your rewards to another; as it has been no part of my ob-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

ject to gain them, they are not necessary to my satisfaction. I have done good, without expecting your gratitude, and without caring for your approbation. If conscience and my Creator had not been more auspicious than you, none of these virtues would ever have opened to the day. When I ought to have been an object of your compassion, I might have perished; now, when you find I can serve your interests, you will affect to acknowledge me and reward me; but I will abide by my destiny to verify the principle that virtue is its own reward. In either case, virtuous or wicked, the man who has been compelled to do without assistance, will spurn interference.

Common life would supply illustrations of the effect of desertion, in examples of some of the most resolute men having become such partly from being left friendless in early life. The case has also sometimes happened that a wife and mother, remarkable perhaps for gentleness and acquiescence before, has been compelled, after the death of her husband on whom she depended, and when she has met with nothing but neglect or unkindness from relations and those who had been accounted friends, to adopt a plan of her own, and has executed it with a resolution which has astonished even herself.

The decision of Satan, in *Paradise Lost*, is represented as consolidated by his reflections on his hopeless banishment from heaven, which oppress him with sadness for some moments, but he soon resumes his invincible spirit, and utters the impressive but sublime sentiment,



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

**"What matter where, if I be still the same."**

Success tends considerably to reinforce this commanding quality. It is true that a man possessing it in a high degree will not lose it by occasional failure; for if the failure was caused by something entirely beyond the reach of human knowledge and ability, he will remember that fortitude is the virtue required in meeting unfavorable events which in no sense depended on him; if by something which might have been known and prevented, he will feel that even the experience of failure completes his competence, by admonishing his prudence, and enlarging his understanding. But as schemes and measures of action rightly adjusted to their proposed ends will generally attain them, continual failure would show something essentially wrong in a man's system, and destroy his confidence, or else expose it as mere absurdity or obstinacy. On the contrary, when a man has ascertained by experiment the justness of his calculations and the extent of his powers, when he has measured his force with various persons, when he has braved and vanquished difficulty, and partly seized the prize, he will carry forward the result of all this in an intrepid self-sufficiency for whatever may yet await him.

In some men, whose lives have been spent in constant perils, continued success has produced a confidence beyond its rational effect, by inspiring a presumption that the common laws of human affairs were, in their case, superseded by the decrees of a peculiar destiny, securing them from almost the possibility of disaster; and this su-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

perstitious feeling, though it has displaced the unconquerable resolution from its rational basis, has often produced the most wonderful effects. This dictated Caesar's expression to the mariner who was terrified at the storm and billows, "What art thou afraid of?—thy vessel carries Caesar." The brave men in the times of the English Commonwealth were, some of them, indebted in a degree for their magnanimity to this idea of a special destination, entertained as a religious sentiment.

The wilfulness of an obstinate person is sometimes fortified by some single instance of remarkable success in his undertakings, which is promptly recalled in every case where his decisions are questioned or opposed, as a proof, or ground of just presumption, that he must in this instance too be right; especially if that one success happened contrary to your predictions.

The habit of associating with inferiors, among whom a man can always, and therefore does always, take the precedence and give the law, is conducive to a subordinate coarse kind of decision of character.

In viewing the characters and actions of the men who have possessed in imperial eminence the quality which I have attempted to describe, one cannot but wish it were possible to know how much of this mighty superiority was created by the circumstances in which they were placed; but it is inevitable to believe that there was some vast intrinsic difference from ordinary men in the original constitutional structure of the mind. In observing lately a man who appeared too vacant

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

almost to think of a purpose, too indifferent to resolve upon it, and too sluggish to execute it if he had resolved, I was distinctly struck with the idea of the distance between him and Marius, of whom I happened to have been reading; and it was beyond my power to believe that any circumstances on earth, though ever so perfectly combined and adapted, would have produced in this man, if placed under their fullest influence from his childhood, any resemblance (unless perhaps the courage to enact a diminutive imitation in revenge and cruelty) of the formidable Roman.

It is needless to discuss whether a person who is practically evinced, at the age of maturity, to want the stamina of this character, can, by any process, acquire it. Indeed such a person cannot have sufficient force of will to make the complete experiment. If there were the unconquerable will that would persist to seize all possible means, and apply them in order to attain, if I may so express it, this stronger mode of active existence, it would prove the possession already of a high degree of the character sought; and if there is not this will, how then is the supposed attainment possible?

Yet though it is improbable that a very irresolute man can ever become a habitually decisive one, it should be observed that, since there are degrees of this powerful quality, and since the essential principles of it, when partially existing in those degrees, cannot be supposed subject to definite and ultimate limitation, like the dimension of the bodily stature, it might be possible to apply a discipline which should advance a man

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

from the lowest degree to the next, from that to the third, and how much further—it will be worth his trying, if his first successful experiments have not cost more in the efforts for making the attainment, than he judges likely to be repaid by any good he shall gain from its exercise. I have but a very imperfect conception of the discipline; but will suggest a hint or two.

In the first place, the indispensable necessity of a clear and comprehensive knowledge of the concerns before us, seems too obvious for remark; and yet no man has been sufficiently sensible of it, till he has been placed in circumstances which forced him to act before he had time, or after he had made ineffectual efforts, to obtain the needful information and understanding. The pain of having brought things to an unfortunate issue, is hardly greater than that of proceeding in the conscious ignorance which continually threatens such an issue. While thus proceeding at hazard, under some compulsion which makes it impossible for him to remain in inaction, a man looks round for information as eagerly as a benighted wanderer would for the light of a human dwelling. He perhaps labors to recall what he thinks he once heard or read as relating to a similar situation, without dreaming at that time that such instruction could ever come to be of importance to him; and is distressed to find his best recollection so indistinct as to be useless. He would give a considerable sum, if some particular book could be brought to him at the instant; or a certain document which he believes to be in existence; or the detail of a process, the terms of

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

a prescription, or the model of an implement. He thinks how many people know, without its being of any present use to them, exactly what could be of such important service to him, if he could know it. In some cases, a line, a sentence, a monosyllable of affirming or denying, or a momentary sight of an object, would be inexpressibly valuable and welcome. And he resolves that if he can once happily escape from the present difficulty, he will apply himself day and night to obtain knowledge, not concerning one particular matter only, but divers others, in provision against possible emergencies, rather than be so involved and harassed again. It might really be of service to have been occasionally forced to act under the disadvantage of conscious ignorance (if the affair was not so important as to allow the consequence to be very injurious) as an effectual lesson on the necessity of knowledge in order to decision either of plan or execution. It must indeed be an extreme case that will compel a considerate man to act in the absence of knowledge; yet he may sometimes be necessitated to proceed to action, when he is sensible his information is far from extending to the whole of the concern in which he is going to commit himself. And in this case he will feel no little uneasiness while transacting that part of it in which his knowledge is competent, when he looks forward to the point where that knowledge terminates; unless he be conscious of possessing an exceedingly prompt faculty of catching information at the moment that he wants it for use; as Indians set out on a long journey with but a

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

trifling stock of provision, because they are sure that their bows or guns will procure it by the way. It is one of the nicest points of wisdom to decide how much less than complete knowledge, in any question of practical interest, will warrant a man to venture on an undertaking in the presumption that the deficiency will be supplied in time to prevent either perplexity or disaster.

A thousand familiar instances show the effect of complete knowledge on determination. An artisan may be said to be decisive as to the mode of working a piece of iron or wood, because he is certain of the proper process and the effect. A man perfectly acquainted with the intricate trails of a forest takes the right one without a moment's hesitation; while a stranger, who has only some very vague information, is lost in perplexity. It is easy to imagine what a number of circumstances may occur in the course of a life, or even of a year, in which a man cannot thus readily determine, and thus confidently proceed without a compass and an exactness of knowledge which few persons have application enough to acquire. And it would be frightful to know to what extent human interests are committed to the direction of ignorance.

In connection with the necessity of knowledge, I would suggest the importance of cultivating, with the utmost industry, a conclusive manner of thinking. In the first place, let the general course of thinking partake of the nature of reasoning; and let it be remembered that this name does not belong to a series of thoughts and fancies which follow one another without deduc-

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

tion or dependence, and which can therefore no more bring a subject to a proper issue, than a number of separate links will answer the mechanical purpose of a chain. The conclusion which terminates such a series, does not deserve the name of result or conclusion, since it has little more than a casual connection with what went before; the conclusion might as properly have taken place at an earlier point of the train, or have been deferred till that train had been extended much further. Instead of having been busily employed in this kind of thinking, for perhaps many hours, a man might possibly as well have been sleeping all the time; since the single thought which is now to determine his conduct, might have happened to be the first thought that occurred to him on awaking. It only happens to occur to him now; it does not follow from what he has been thinking these hours; at least, he cannot prove that some other thought might not just as appropriately have come in its place at the end, and to make an end, of this long series. It is easy to see how feeble that determination is likely to be, which is formed on so narrow a ground as the last accidental idea that comes into the mind, or on so loose a ground as this crude uncombined assemblage of ideas. Indeed it is difficult to form a determination at all on such slight ground. A man delays, and waits for some more satisfactory thought to occur to him; and perhaps he has not waited long, before an idea arises in his mind of a quite contrary tendency to the last. As this additional idea is not, more than that which preceded it, the result

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

of any process of reasoning, nor brings with it any arguments, it may be expected to give place soon to another and still another; and they are all in succession of equal authority, that is properly of none. If at last an idea occurs to him which seems of considerable authority, he may here make a stand, and adopt his resolution, with firmness, as he thinks, and commence the execution. But still if he cannot see whence the principle which has determined him derives its authority—on what it holds for that authority—his resolution is likely to prove treacherous and evanescent in any serious trial. A principle so little verified by sound reasoning, is not *terra firma* for a man to trust himself upon; it is only as a slight incrustation on a yielding element; it is like the sand compacted into a thin surface on the lake Serbonis, which broke away under the unfortunate army which had begun to advance on it, mistaking it for solid ground.—These remarks may seem to refer only to a single instance of deliberation; but they are equally applicable to all the deliberations and undertakings of a man's life; the same connected manner of thinking, which is so necessary to give firmness of determination and of conduct in a particular instance, will, if habitual, greatly contribute to form a decisive character.

Not only should thinking be thus reduced by a strong and patient discipline, to a train or process, in which all the parts at once depend upon and support one another, but also this train should be followed on to a full conclusion. It should be held as a law generally in force, that



## DECISION OF CHARACTER

---

the question must be disposed of before it is let alone. The mind may carry on this accurate process to some length, and then stop through indolence, or start away through levity; but it can never possess that rational confidence in its opinions which is requisite to the character in question, till it is conscious of acquiring them from an exercise of thought continued on to its result. The habit of thinking thus completely is indispensable to the general character of decision; and in any particular instance, it is found that short pieces of courses of reasoning, though correct as far as they go, are inadequate to make a man master of the immediate concern. They are besides of little value for aid to future thinking; because from being left thus incomplete they are but slightly retained by the mind, and soon sink away; in the same manner as the walls of a structure left unfinished speedily moulder.

A vigorous exercise of thought may sometimes for a while seem to increase the difficulty of decision, by discovering a great number of unthought-of reasons for a measure and against it, so that the most discriminating mind may, during a short space, find itself in the state of the magnetic needle under the equator. But no case in the world can really have a perfect equality of opposite reasons; nor will it long appear to have it, in the estimate of a clear and well-disciplined intellect, which after some time will ascertain, though the difference is small, which side of the question has ten, and which has but nine. At any rate this is the mind to come nearest in the approximation.

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

Another thing that would powerfully assist toward complete decision, both in the particular instance, and in the general spirit of the character, is for a man to place himself in a situation analogous to that in which Caesar placed his soldiers, when he burnt the ships which brought them to land. If his judgment is really decided, let him commit himself irretrievably, by doing something which shall oblige him to do more, which shall lay on him the necessity of doing all. If a man resolves as a general intention to be a philanthropist, I would say to him: Form some actual plan of philanthropy, and begin the execution of it to-day, so explicitly, that you cannot relinquish it without becoming degraded even in your own estimation. If a man would be a hero, let him, if it be possible to find a good cause in arms, go presently to the camp. If a man is desirous of a travelling adventure through distant countries, and deliberately approves both his purpose and his scheme, let him actually prepare to set off. Let him not still dwell, in imagination, on mountains, rivers, and temples; but give directions about his remittances, his personal equipments, or the carriage, or the vessel, in which he is to go. Ledyard surprised the official person who asked him how soon he could be ready to set off for the interior of Africa, by replying promptly and firmly, "To-morrow."

Again, it is highly conducive to a manly firmness, that the interests in which it is exerted should be of a dignified order, so as to give the passions an ample scope and a noble object. The degradation they suffer in being devoted to mean

## DECISION OF CHARACTER

and trivial pursuits, often perceived to be such in spite of every fallacy of the imagination, would in general, I should think, also debilitate their energy, and therefore preclude strength of character, to which nothing can be more adverse than to have the fire of the passions damped by the mortification of feeling contempt for the object, as often as its meanness is betrayed by failure of the delusion which invests it.

And finally, I would repeat that one should think a man's own conscientious approbation of his conduct must be of vast importance to his decision in the outset, and his persevering constancy. It is melancholy to think of men of power adequate for vindicating each good cause, which has languished in a world adverse to all goodness, and for intimidating the collective vices of a nation or age—it is, indeed, melancholy to contemplate such beings becoming themselves the mighty exemplars, giants, and champions of those vices. It is fearful to follow them in thought from this world, all the powers and difficulties and inhabitants of which could not subdue their adamant resolution, to the Supreme Tribunal where that resolution must tremble and melt away.





